



Emerging Scholars Organization (ESO)
An Affiliate of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature

Spotlight on Southernist Scholars Initiative

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Undergraduate Alma Mater: The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Graduate Alma Mater(s): The University of Mississippi; the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

1. How did you become involved in southern studies? Did you enter graduate school knowing exactly what you wanted to investigate or did you come to the field during your Ph.D. program or afterward?

I began my master's program with very little direction: it was a test run more than anything else. After college, I worked in a pizza kitchen, then in a law office. Needless to say, at the time I had very little direction. But I knew I liked my English classes in college and I liked to write, so I figured it couldn't hurt to apply for master's programs, just to try it out. I thought that if I survived a master's, liked teaching, and still felt I could stick with it, I would go on to the PhD. And if I disliked any aspect of the experience, I would do something else. And it worked out.

When I first entered the master's program at Mississippi, my projected specialization was like everything else in my life at that point: vague and undefined. I was interested in nineteenth-century literature, but I hadn't read much of it as an undergraduate. I thought southern studies might be interesting, but I hesitated in committing to a field that I thought represented many of the stereotypical ideas of the South I had grown up trying to avoid as a kid in Nashville.

Fortunately for me, the graduate program at Mississippi doesn't allow for halfhearted commitments to southern studies. Because both the program and the space are so imbued with

“the South” and studies of it, it’s inescapable. Walking by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s grave on a regular basis (I visited him more than Faulkner) forced me to constantly reexamine the 2 questions of regional and cultural identity that were being posed in present-day contexts. Once I began the PhD program at Tennessee, I knew I wanted to trace those questions to their earliest roots in southern literature.

2. What is the most rewarding aspect of your current position? What is the most challenging, or what has been surprising? (For example, do you spend a lot of time doing something that you did not foresee when you went on the market?)

The answer to the first question is easy: the students and getting them to connect with what I find interesting in my own research. In this respect, teaching at a historically black university (HBCU) is an unexpectedly huge advantage. As a scholar interested in the early South, discussions of slavery and race come up in my classes a lot. And while at my previous institutions (all predominantly white institutions, or PWIs), I was the random professor who talked about race all the time, but at Fisk it's par for the course. It also helps that my Fisk students are the best I've ever had.

For the more challenging aspects of my position, I think almost everyone underestimates this part of the profession while still a graduate student: service and committee work. As PhD candidates, I imagine many of us have an idealized vision of being a tenure-track professor: teaching literature classes to students who want to be there, working on research and publications, and going to conferences.

And while all of this is (kind of) true, add on hours for committee meetings. Plus the hours at the faculty meetings. Plus the hours advising students. Plus the hours mentoring students for scholarships, fellowships, or internships. Ultimately, it becomes a delicate balance between time devoted to teaching, time devoted to research, and time devoted to a myriad of other demands. It's manageable, but it helps to be hyper-vigilant and hyper-protective of one's time.

3. What classes do you typically teach (undergraduate or graduate)? Which classes do you enjoy teaching the most?

I teach undergraduate courses exclusively, a split between American literature courses and some first-year writing classes.

I actually enjoy teaching first-year writing and research methodologies. It's fun to design new assignments, and I find that practice influences the way I structure the assignments for my upper-division literature courses.

My favorites, however, are definitely my early American literature courses. It's my specialty, but I also have the most fun coming up with assignments for these classes. The Fisk Library's Special Collections are an underutilized resource, and I've developed a number of projects in which my students work with the archives. We've explored a collection of anti-slavery 3 pamphlets from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and next year my class will work with a collection of prints from early American minstrel shows.

4. Why do you think southern studies is useful to students and professors outside of the field?

The nature of southern history means that southern studies deals with topics that have clear relevance to contemporary America: racism, the prison industrial complex, class dynamics, climate change, gender. Viewing these topics through the lens of the South allows us as scholars to highlight some patterns more clearly, where we can see the South as a microcosm of the problems endemic in American society. Rather than seeing certain issues as being exclusive to the South, southern studies—especially in the past decade or so—forces an examination as to how those issues have immediate national and international implications.

Teaching at an HBCU has cemented this idea for me. With my predominantly African American students, topics that are usually considered “southern problems” are regular subjects of conversation, regular facts of life. For example, police brutality and the black community. It would be easy to say that the violence is a southern problem, one born out of a history of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow. Given the recent pattern of police-related deaths and murders across the country, however, it’s clearly not that simple. But perhaps tracing these trends to their historical sources in and as channeled through the South will help give us a greater understanding of the contemporary moment.

5. What is the best advice that you received about the job market? Or what is the advice that you most frequently or emphatically give to your graduate students on the market or to your undergraduate students who want to pursue a Ph.D.?

In terms of the PhD, I often tell my students to approach graduate school as a means to an end, a tool to accomplish something further in the future, rather than an endpoint in and of itself. Many of them see the PhD as a funnel into teaching and professorship, which scares them off at first. Even though I did go the academic route, I found that the most valuable part of graduate school was not the coursework or academically oriented elements, but learning certain skills: clear and concise writing, developing a self-motivated work schedule, being able to think creatively and independently, networking (as gross as that sounds). Those are immensely useful qualities in any field outside of academia.

For the job market, the best piece of advice I received also proved to be the truest: most things are beyond my control, or worse, have nothing to do with me. Every step of the job search process is influenced by so many different factors, that a candidate’s training and qualifications are just one subset. Sometimes a university is beleaguered by financial difficulties, has interdepartmental infighting, or has an inside hire. Or, things simply don’t gel personally between the candidate and the committee. All of this occurs independently of the candidate herself.

It sounds depressing initially, but I actually found this to be very liberating while on the market. With all of these different elements in play, if I wasn’t invited for an interview, a campus visit, or offered a job, I didn’t necessarily see it as a failure on my part. Rather, it reflected a larger process over which I only had a modicum of control. What I could control was my own performance: I worked on my application materials, prepared for interviews as much as I could, and tried to conduct myself in the most professional manner I knew how. If that didn’t result in a job, then I knew it wasn’t my fault and it wasn’t meant to be. I fully realize that it’s easy to hand

out this advice now that I have a tenure-track job, but it is this sort of laissez-faire attitude that kept me (relatively) sane during my job searches.